

# Grand Piano and a Chandelier



By Haiganoush  
Krikorian Preisler

In the spring of 1948, my parents, Aram Krikorian and Nevert (née Kalaidjian), found themselves in Amman, having left their home in West Jerusalem to find a safe place for my mother to give birth to their first child. Back home, in the Upper Baqa'a neighborhood of West Jerusalem, less than two kilometers from the King David Hotel, events were developing into a catastrophe that would forever change their lives and the lives of hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians.

My brother was born in May 1948 in Amman. My parents would never be able to see their home again. No Palestinians who fled the violence in Palestine with their families were allowed return to what then became the newly created state of Israel.

Seventy years later, in 2018, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Nakba*, I called my brother, now 70 years old and living in Australia. "We need to meet in Amman," I said, "and make the journey back to Jerusalem." We needed to make the journey back to the family home, a trip that my parents could never make in their lifetime. We, their children, however, having acquired US and Australian citizenships, were now able to go back home... Or at least to go to the front of our parents' home, at 36 Old Beit Lehem Road in West Jerusalem, and take a picture!

My father's family belonged to the Armenian community, referred to as "Kaghakatsi" or local Jerusalemites. Evidence of Armenian presence in Jerusalem goes as far back as the fifth century (Birds Mosaic, Musrara, Jerusalem). The tenth-century Queen Melisende of Jerusalem granted lands to the Armenian Church, which became the nucleus of the Armenian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Krikorian home in the Armenian Quarter had been allocated to the family by the Armenian patriarchate as early as the seventeenth century.

In 1890, my paternal grandfather, Hagop, and his brother, Soghomon, bought two plots of land in the Upper Baqa'a neighborhood of West Jerusalem. The brothers and their four sisters built two houses on these plots, often doing much of the labor themselves. My father was born and raised in this house. He never wanted to talk about his days growing up in Jerusalem, but I have pictures of him: at the YMCA tennis courts (opposite the King David Hotel), with his field hockey team, with the boy scouts, and on trips to Beirut, Amman, and Egypt.

One of the valued options for middle-class Jerusalemites at the time was the opportunity to go to the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. My father got his civil engineering degree from AUB and subsequently worked, among other projects, on building the Ras al-Naquoura railway crossing along the Beirut-Haifa-Tripoli rail line (connecting the lines across the border between Palestine and Lebanon, open at the time), which was completed in 1942. He was also a licensed surveyor with the British Mandate Palestine Government.

My father's cousin, Krikor Krikorian, who grew up next door at 38 Beit



The house built by the author's grandparents at 36 Old Beit Lehem Road.



My father at the YMCA tennis courts in the early 1940s.



Aram Krikorian with his field hockey team in the early 1940s.

Lehem Road, got his MD from AUB and served as the deputy chief medical officer for Palestine.

My maternal grandfather, Hovannes Kalaidjian, belonged to the group of Armenians that came to Jerusalem as refugees, survivors of the genocide against the Armenian people carried out by the Ottoman



My father (second from the right) and his cousins enjoyed listening to what looks like the latest technology of the time: a radio.

Turkish Empire during and after World War I. After his first wife and five children had been killed during the 1920 Marash massacres, he managed to make it to Jerusalem to start a new life, penniless but aided by the support of the Kaghakatsi Armenians who housed the refugees in the Armenian quarters. He married Heghini Tchuranian, an orphan and a survivor of the 1895 “Hamidian” massacres of Armenians in Zeytoun (in today’s eastern Turkey). My grandfather then established and ran a bulghur factory in the Old City’s Armenian Quarter. By the time of his daughter’s, my mother’s, marriage, Hovannes, had such a successful and locally known business that

his daughter was simply known as the *bulghurji’s* daughter. Today, the bulghur factory, with an entrance facing the Armenian St. James Church, is a restaurant.

With the influx of Armenian refugees between 1915 and 1921, the population of Armenians in Jerusalem tripled. The first co-ed Armenian school, Sts. Tarkmanchatz, was established in the Armenian Quarter in 1929. My mother, six years old at the time, was among the first students enrolled in the school, graduating in 1937.

There were no Armenian high schools in Jerusalem at the time, therefore, most Armenians from

Jerusalem ended up going to schools where the curriculum was taught in English or French. My mother attended the Jerusalem Girls’ College and my father the Collège des Frères near New Gate. The result was that most Jerusalemite kids graduated from high school speaking three or four languages.

My parents were married in Bethlehem in 1946. After their wedding, they moved into the first floor of the family house in the Upper Baqa’a neighborhood where my father’s brother, Vahan Krikorian, and his wife and two sons lived on the second floor. Among my mother’s most cherished memories of this house were the grand piano she had and the beautiful chandelier in the dining room. I have images of my mother playing that piano, as she had taken lessons as a young girl from a recent Jewish immigrant from Germany. Rumors have it that the grand piano ended up at the Jerusalem YMCA. The chandelier might still be hanging over the dining room table on the first floor of 36 Old Beit Lehem Road.



Cousin Krikor Krikorian, on the right, with his sisters and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, 1934.

The last picture I have of my parents pre-1948 shows a happy gathering in Jericho, where my father is with his new wife and her family, looking forward to happy days to come!

Postscript: After the *Nakba*, armed with the advantages of a middle-class upbringing – multilingual; higher education; and a profession that can



Aram Krikorian, seated on the right, surveying in Lake Hula, c. 1943.

Heghine, Nevart (my mother), Haigaz, Hovannes, 1937.





The graduating class (eighth grade) at Sts. Tarkmanchatz School in 1937. My mother is standing in the first row, sixth from the right.



My parents visiting my mother's family in Jericho shortly before the *Nakba*.



My parents' wedding in April 1946, at St. Nicholas Church, Armenian Monastery, Bethlehem, Palestine.

villages, were not that lucky and, consequently, their descendants are still languishing in refugee camps in Jordan, Syrian, and Lebanon.

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travel with you – my parents, after a few years of hardship, were able to establish a new comfortable life in the diaspora. Many others, especially those who came from the many depopulated Palestinian

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